

How Carlos Webster Changed His Name to Carl and Became a Famous Oklahoma Lawman (2003)

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ELMORE LEONARD

Part I

The fate of a bank-robbing murderer resided in two scoops of peach ice cream on top of a sugar cone.

Carlos Webster was fifteen years old the time he witnessed the robbery and murder at Deering's drugstore. It was in the summer of 1921. He told Bud Maddox, the Okmulgee chief of police, he had driven a load of cows up to the yard at Tulsa and by the time he got back it was dark. He said he left the stock trailer across the street from Deering's and went inside to get an ice-cream cone. When he identified one of the robbers as Frank Miller, Bud Maddox said, "Son, Frank Miller robs banks, he don't bother with drugstores no more."

Carlos had been raised on hard work and respect for his elders. He said, "I could be wrong," knowing he wasn't.

They brought him over to police headquarters in the courthouse to look at photos. He pointed to Frank Miller staring at him from a \$500 wanted bulletin and picked the other one, Jim Ray Monks, from mug shots. Bud Maddox said, "You're positive, huh?" and asked Carlos which one was it shot the Indian. Meaning Junior Harjo with the tribal police, who'd walked in not knowing the store was being robbed.

"Was Frank Miller shot him," Carlos said, "with a .45 Colt."

"You sure it was a Colt?"

"Navy issue, like my dad's."

"I'm teasing," Bud Maddox said. He and Carlos's dad, Virgil Webster, were buddies, both having fought in the Spanish-American War, and for a number of years were the local heroes; but now doughboys were back from France telling about the Great War over there.

"If you like to know what I think happened," Carlos said, "Frank Miller only came in for a pack of smokes."

Bud Maddox stopped him. "Tell it from the time you got there."

Okay, well, the reason was to get an ice-cream cone. "Mr. Deering was in back doing prescriptions--he looked out of that little window and told me to help myself. So I went over to the soda fountain and scooped up a double dip of peach on a sugar cone and went up to the cigar counter and left a nickel by the cash register. That's where I was when I see these two men come in wearing suits and hats I thought at first were salesmen. Mr. Deering calls to me to wait on them as I know the store pretty well. Frank Miller comes up to the counter--"

"You knew right away who he was?"

"Once he was close, yes sir, from pictures of him in the paper. He said to give him a deck of Luckies. I did and he picks up the nickel I'd left by the register. Hands it to me and says, 'This ought to cover it.'"

"You tell him it was yours?"

"No, sir."

"Or a pack of Luckies was fifteen cents?"

"I didn't argue with him. But see, I think that's when he got the idea of robbing the store, the cash register sitting there, nobody around but me holding my ice-cream cone. Mr. Deering never came out from the back. The other one, Jim Ray Monks? He wanted a tube of Ungentine, he said, for a heat rash was bothering him, under his arms. I got it for him and he didn't pay either. Then Frank Miller says, 'Let's see what you have in the register.' I told him I didn't know how to open it as I didn't work there. He leans over the counter and points to a key--a man who knows his cash registers--and says, 'That one right there. Hit it and she'll open for you.' I press the key--Mr. Deering must've heard it ring open, he calls from the back of the store, 'Carlos, you able to help them out?' Frank Miller raised his voice, saying, 'Carlos is doing fine,' using my name. He told me then to take out the scrip but leave the change."

"How much did he get?"

"No more'n fifty dollars," Carlos said. He took his time thinking about what happened right after, starting with Frank Miller looking at his ice-cream cone. Carlos saw it as personal, something between him and Frank Miller, so he skipped over it, telling Bud Maddox:

"I put the money on the counter for him, mostly singles. I look up--"

"Junior Harjo walks in," Bud Maddox said, "a

robbery in progress."

"Yes sir, but Junior doesn't know it. Frank Miller's at the counter with his back to him. Jim Ray Monks is over at the soda fountain getting into the ice cream. Neither of them had their guns out, so I doubt Junior saw it as a robbery. But Mr. Deering sees Junior and calls out he's got his mother's medicine. Then says for all of us to hear, 'She tells me they got you raiding stills, looking for moonshine.' He said something about setting a jar aside for him and that's all I heard. Now the guns are coming out, Frank Miller's Colt from inside his suit ... I guess all he had to see was Junior's badge and his sidearm, that was enough, Frank Miller shot him. He'd know with that Colt one round would do the job, but he stepped up and shot Junior again, lying on the floor."

There was a silence.

"I'm trying to recall," Bud Maddox said, "how many Frank Miller's killed. I believe six, half of 'em police officers."

"Seven," Carlos said, "you count the bank hostage had to stand on his running board. Fell off and broke her neck?"

"I just read the report on that one," Bud Maddox said. "Was a Dodge Touring, same as Black Jack Pershing's staff car over in France."

"They drove away from the drugstore in a LaSalle," Carlos said, and gave Bud Maddox the license number.

Here was the part Carlos saw as personal and had skipped over, beginning with Frank Miller looking at

his ice-cream cone.

Then asking, "What is that, peach?" Carlos said it was and Frank Miller reached out his hand, saying, "Lemme have a bite there," and took the cone to hold it away from him as it was starting to drip. He bent over to lick it a couple of times before putting his mouth around a big bite he took from the top dip. He said, "Mmmmm, that's good," with a trace of peach ice cream along the edge of his mustache. Frank Miller stared at Carlos then like he was studying his features and began licking the cone again. He said, "Carlos, huh?" cocking his head to one side. "You got the dark hair, but you don't look like any Carlos to me. What's your other name?"

"Carlos Huntington Webster, that's all of 'em."

"It's a lot of name for a boy," Frank Miller said. "So you're part greaser on your mama's side, huh? What's she, Mex?"

Carlos hesitated before saying, "Cuban. I was named for her dad."

"Cuban's the same as Mex," Frank Miller said. "You got greaser blood in you, boy, even if it don't show much. You come off lucky there." He licked the cone again, holding it with the tips of his fingers, the little finger sticking out in a dainty kind of way.

Carlos, fifteen years old but as tall as this man with the ice cream on his mustache, wanted to call him a dirty name and hit him in the mouth as hard as he could, then go over the counter and bulldog him to the floor the way he'd put a bull calf down to brand

and cut off its balls. Fifteen years old but he wasn't stupid. He held on while his heart beat against his chest. He felt the need to stand up to this man, saying finally, "My dad was on the battleship Maine when she was blown up in Havana Harbor, February 15, 1898. He survived and fought the dons with Huntington's Marines in that war in Cuba and met my mother, Graciaplana. When the war was over he went back and brought her to Oklahoma when it was still Indian territory. She died having me, so I never knew her. I never met my dad's mother, either. She's part Northern Cheyenne, lives on a reservation out at Lame Deer, Montana," saying it in a voice that was slow and calm compared to what he felt inside. Saying, "What I want to ask you-- if having Indian blood too, makes me something else besides a greaser." Saying it in Frank Miller's face, causing this man with ice cream on his mustache to squint at him.

"For one thing," Frank Miller said, "the Indian blood makes you and your daddy breeds, him more'n you." He kept staring at Carlos as he raised the cone, his little finger sticking out, Carlos thinking to lick it again, but what he did was toss the cone over his shoulder, not looking or caring where it would land.

It hit the floor in front of Junior Harjo just then walking in, badge on his tan shirt, revolver on his hip, and Carlos saw the situation turning around. He felt the excitement of these moments but with some relief, too. It picked him up and gave him the nerve to say to Frank Miller, "Now you're gonna have to clean up your mess." Except Junior wasn't pulling his .38; he was looking at the ice cream on the linoleum and Mr. Deering was calling to him about his mother's

medicine and about raiding stills and Frank Miller was turning from the counter with the Colt in his hand, firing, shooting Junior Harjo and stepping closer to shoot him again.

There was no sign of Mr. Deering. Jim Ray Monks came over to have a look at Junior. Frank Miller laid his Colt on the glass counter, picked up the cash in both hands, and shoved the bills into his coat pockets before looking at Carlos again.

"You said something to me. Geronimo come in and you said something sounded smart-aleck."

Carlos said, "What'd you kill him for?" still looking at Junior on the floor.

"I want to know what you said to me."

Frank Miller waited.

Carlos looked up, rubbing the back of his hand across his mouth. "I said, 'Now you'll have to clean up your mess.' The ice cream on the floor."

"That's all?"

"It's what I said."

Frank Miller kept looking at him. "You had a gun you'd of shot me, huh? Calling you a greaser. Hell, it's a law of nature, you got any of that blood in you you're a greaser. I can't help it, it's how it is. Being a breed on top of it--I don't know if that's called anything or not. But you could pass if you want, you look enough white. Hell, call yourself Carl, I won't tell on you."

Carlos and his dad lived in a big new house Virgil said was a California bungalow, off the road and into the pecan trees, a house that was all porch across the front and windows in the steep slant of the roof, a house built last year with oil money--those derricks pumping away on a back section of the property. The rest of it was graze and over a thousand acres of pecan trees, Virgil's pride, land gathered over twenty years since coming home from Cuba. He could let the trees go and live high off his oil checks, never work again as long as he lived. Nothing doing--harvesttime Virgil was out with his crew shaking pecan trees. He had Carlos seeing to the cows, a hundred or so head of cross-Brahmas at a time feeding till the day they were shipped to market.

When Carlos got back from a haul Virgil would be sitting on the porch with a bottle of Mexican beer. Prohibition was no bother; Virgil had a steady supply of beer, tequila, and mescal brought up through Texas by the oil people, part of the deal.

The night he witnessed the robbery and murder Carlos sat with his old dad and told him the whole story, including what he'd left out of his account to Bud Maddox, even telling about the ice cream on Frank Miller's mustache. Carlos was anxious to know if his dad thought he might've caused Junior Harjo to get shot. "I don't see how," Virgil said, "from what you told me. I don't know why you'd even think of it, other than you were right there and what you're wondering is if you could've prevented him from getting shot."

Virgil Webster was forty-six years old, a widower since Graci-aplena died in aught-six giving him Carlos

and requiring Virgil to look for a woman to nurse the child. He found Narcissa Raincrow, sixteen, a pretty little Creek girl, daughter of Johnson Raincrow, deceased, an outlaw so threatening peace officers shot him while he was asleep. Narcissa had lost her own child giving birth, wasn't married, and Virgil hired her on as a wet nurse. By the time little Carlos had lost interest in her breasts, Virgil had acquired an appreciation. It wasn't long after Narcissa became their housekeeper she was sleeping in Virgil's bed. She cooked good, put on some weight but was still pretty, listened to Virgil's stories and laughed when she was supposed to. Carlos loved her, had fun talking to her about Indian ways, and her murderous dad, but never called her anything but Narcissa. Carlos liked the idea of being part Cuban; he saw himself wearing a panama hat when he was older.

He said to his dad that night on the dark porch, "Are you thinking I should've done something?"

"Like what?"

"Yell at Junior it's a robbery? No, I had to say something smart to Frank Miller. I was mad and wanted to get back at him somehow."

"For taking your ice-cream cone?"

"For what he said."

"What part was it provoked you?"

"What part? What he said about being a greaser."

"You or your mama?"

"Both. And calling me and you breeds."

Virgil said, "You let that bozo get to you? Probably can't read nor write, the reason he has to rob banks. Jesus Christ, get some sense." He swigged his Mexican beer and said, "I know what you mean though, how you felt."

"What would you have done?"

"Same as you, nothing," Virgil said. "But if you're talking about in my time, when I was still a marine? I'd of shoved the ice-cream cone up his goddamn nose."

* * *

Three days later sheriff's deputies spotted the LaSalle in the backyard of a farmhouse near Checotah, the house belonging to a woman by the name of Faye Harris. Her former husband, Olin "Skeet" Harris, deceased, shot dead in a gun battle with U.S. marshals, had at one time been a member of the Frank Miller Gang. The deputies waited for marshals to arrive, as apprehending armed fugitives was their specialty. The marshals slipped into the house at first light, fed the dog, tiptoed into Faye's bedroom, and got the drop on Frank Miller before he could dig his Colt from under the pillow. Jim Ray Monks went out a window, started across the barn lot, and caught a load of double-aught that put him down. The two were brought to Okmul-gee and locked up to await trial.

Carlos said to his dad, "Boy, those marshals know their stuff, don't they? Armed killer--they shove a gun in his ear and yank him out of bed."

He was certain he'd be called to testify and was anxious, couldn't wait. He told his dad he intended to look directly at Frank Miller as he described the cold-blooded killing. Virgil advised him not to say any more than he had to. Carlos said he wondered if he should mention the ice cream on Frank Miller's mustache.

"Why would you want to?" Virgil said.

"Show I didn't miss anything."

"You know how many times the other night you told me about the ice cream on his mustache?" Virgil said. "I'm thinking three or four times."

"You had to see it. Here's this Frank Miller everybody's scared of, doesn't know enough to wipe his mouth."

"I'd forget that," Virgil said. "He shot a lawman in cold blood. That's all you need to remember about him."

A month passed and then another, Carlos becoming fidgety. Virgil found out why it was taking so long, came home to Narcissa putting supper on the table, Carlos sitting there, and told them the delay was caused by other counties wanting to get their hands on Frank Miller. So the matter was given to a district court judge to rule on, each county laying out its case, sounding like they'd make a show out of trying him. "His Honor got our prosecutor to offer Frank Miller a deal. Plead guilty to murder in the second degree, the motive self-defense as the victim was armed, and give him ten to fifty years. That would be the end of it, no

trial needed. In other words," Virgil said, "your Frank Miller will get sent to McAlester and be out in five years."

"There was nothing self-defense about it," Carlos said. "Junior wasn't even looking at him when he got shot." Carlos sounding like he was in pain.

"You don't know the system," Virgil said. "The deal worked 'cause Junior's Creek, or else Cherokee. He was a white man Frank Miller'd be doing twenty-five to life."

Another event of note took place that same year, 1921, toward the end of October and late in the afternoon, dusk settling in the orchards. Carlos shot and killed a cattle thief by the name of Wally Tarwater.

Virgil's first thought: It was on account of Frank Miller. The boy was ready this time and from now on would always be ready.

He phoned the undertaker, who came with sheriff's people, and pretty soon two deputy U.S. marshals arrived, Virgil knowing them as serious lawmen in their dark suits and the way they cocked their soft felt hats down on their eyes. The marshals took over, the one who turned out to be the talker saying this Wally Tarwater--now lying in the hearse--was wanted on federal charges of running off livestock and crossing state lines to sell to meat packers. He said to Carlos to go on and tell in his own words what happened.

Virgil saw Carlos start to grin just a little, about to make some remark like, "You want it in my own

words?" and cut him off quick with, "Don't tell no more'n you have to. These people want to get home to their families."

Well, it began with Narcissa saying she felt like a rabbit stew, or squirrel if that's all was out there. "I thought it was too late in the day," Carlos said, "but took a twenty-gauge and went out in the orchard. The pecans had been harvested, most of 'em, so you could see through the trees good."

"Get to it," Virgil said. "You see this fella out in the pasture driving off your cows."

"On a cutting horse," Carlos said. "You could tell this cowboy knew how to work beef. I got closer and watched him, admiring the way he bunched the animals without wearing himself out. I went back to the house and exchanged the twenty-gauge for a Winchester, then went to the barn and saddled up. She's right over there, the clay-bank? The sorrel's his."

The marshal, the one who talked, said, "You went back to get a rifle but don't know yet who he is?"

"I knew it wasn't a friend stealing my cows. He's driving them down towards the Deep Fork bottom where a road comes in there. I nudge Suzie out among the cows still grazing, got close enough to call to him, 'Can I help you?'" Carlos started to smile. "He says, 'Thanks for offering but I'm done here.' I told him he sure was and to get down from his horse. He started to ride away and I fired one in the air to bring him around. I move closer but kept my distance, not knowing what he had under his slicker. By now he sees I'm young, he says, 'I'm picking up cows I bought

off your daddy.' I tell him I'm the cattle outfit here, my dad grows pecans. All he says is, 'Jesus, quit chasing me, boy, and go on home.' Now he opens his slicker to let me see the six-shooter on his leg. And now way off past him a good four hundred yards, I notice the stock trailer, a man standing there by the load ramp."

"You can make him out," the marshal who did the talking said, "from that distance?"

"If he says it," Virgil told the marshal, "then he did."

Carlos waited for the marshals to look at him before saying, "The cowboy starts to ride off and I call to him to wait a second. He reins and looks back. I said, 'But you try to ride off with my stock I'll shoot you.'"

"You spoke to him like that?" the talker said. "How old are you?"

"Going on sixteen. The same age as my dad when he joined the marines."

The quiet marshal spoke for the first time. He said, "So this fella rode off on you . . . ?"

"Yes, sir. Once I see he isn't gonna turn my cows, and he's approaching the stock trailer by now, I shot him." Carlos dropped his tone, saying, "I meant to wing him, put one in the edge of that yellow slicker ... I should've stepped down 'stead of firing from the saddle. I sure didn't mean to hit him square. I see the other fella jump in the truck, doesn't care his partner's on the ground. He goes to drive off and tears the ramp from the trailer. It was empty, no cows aboard. What I did was fire at the hood of the truck to stop it and the

fella jumped out and ran for the trees."

The talkative marshal spoke up. "You're doing all this shooting from four hundred yards?" He glanced toward the Winchester leaning against a pecan tree. "No scope on your rifle?"

"You seem to have trouble with the range," Virgil said to him. "Step out there about a hundred yards and hold up a live snake by its tail. My boy'll shoot its head off for you."

"I believe it," the quiet marshal said.

He brought a card from his vest pocket and handed it between the tips of his fingers to Virgil. He said, "Mr. Webster, I'd be interested to know what your boy sees himself doing in five or six years."

Virgil looked at the card and then handed it to Carlos, meeting his eyes for a second. "You want you can ask him," Virgil said, watching Carlos reading the card that bore the deputy's name, R.C. "Bob" Cardell, and a marshal's star in gold you could feel. "I tell him join the marines and see foreign lands, or get to love pecans if you want to stay home." He could see Carlos moving his thumb over the embossed star on the card. "Tell you the truth, I don't think he knows yet what he wants to be when he grows up," Virgil said to the marshal, and to Carlos, "Isn't that right?"

Carlos raised his head.

"Sir, were you speaking to me?"

Later on Virgil was in the living room reading the paper. He heard Carlos come down from upstairs and

said, "Will Rogers is appearing at the Hippodrome next week, with the Follies. You want to go see him?"

Carlos had his hand on his stomach. "I don't feel so good. I upchucked my supper."

Virgil lowered the newspaper to look at his boy. He said, "You took a man's life today," and watched Carlos nod his head thinking about it. "You never said, but did you look at him laying there?"

"I got down to close his eyes."

"Made you think, huh?"

"It did. I wondered why he didn't believe I'd shoot."

"He saw you as a kid on a horse."

"He knew stealing cows could get him shot or sent to prison. I mean anytime, but it's what he chose to do."

"That's what you thought looking at him? You didn't feel any sympathy for the man?"

"I did; I felt if he'd listened to me he wouldn't be lying there dead."

The room was silent, and now Virgil asked, "How come you didn't shoot the other one?"

"There weren't any cows on the trailer," Carlos said, "else I might've."

It was his son's quiet tone that got to Virgil and made him realize, My Lord, but this boy has a hard bark on him.

Part II

June 13, 1927, Carlos Huntington Webster, now a six-footer, was in Oklahoma City wearing a new light-gray suit of clothes and a panama with the brim curved on his eyes just right, staying at a hotel, riding a streetcar for the first time, and being sworn in as a Deputy United States Marshal; while Lindbergh was being honored in New York City, tons of ticker tape dumped on the Lone Eagle for flying across the ocean; and Frank Miller, released from McAlester in bib overalls, was back in Checotah with Faye Harris, his suit hanging in the closet these six years since the marshals hauled him off in his drawers. The first thing Frank Miller did, once he got off of Faye, was make phone calls to get his gang back together.

Carlos was given a leave to go home after his training and spent it with his old dad, telling him things:

What the room was like at the Huskin Hotel.

What he had to eat at the Plaza Grill.

How he saw a band called Walter Page's Blue Devils that was all colored guys.

How when firing a pistol you put your weight forward, one foot ahead of the other, so if you get hit you can keep firing as you fall.

And one other thing.

Everybody called him Carl instead of Carlos. At first he wouldn't answer to it and got in arguments, a

couple of times almost fistfights.

"You remember Bob Cardell?"

"R.C. 'Bob' Cardell," Virgil said, "the quiet one."

"My boss now. He says, 'I know you're named for your granddaddy to honor him, but you're using it like a chip on your shoulder instead of a name.'"

Virgil was nodding his head. "Ever since that moron Frank Miller called you a greaser. I know what Bob means. Like, Tm Carlos Webster, what're you gonna do about it?' You were little I'd call you Carl sometimes. You liked it okay."

"Bob Cardell says, 'What's wrong with Carl? All it is, it's a nickname for Carlos.'"

"There you are," Virgil said. "Try it on."

"I've been wearing it the past month or so. 'Hi, I'm Deputy U.S. Marshal Carl Webster.'"

"You feel any different?"

"I do, but I can't explain it."

A call from Bob Cardell cut short Carl's leave. The Frank Miller Gang was back robbing banks.

What the marshals tried to do over the next few months was anticipate the gang's moves. They robbed banks in Shawnee, Seminole, and Bowlegs on a line south. Maybe Ada would be next. No, it turned out to be Coalgate.

An eyewitness said he was in the barbershop as

Frank Miller was getting a shave--except the witness didn't know who it was till later, after the bank was robbed. "Him and the barber are talking, this one who's Frank Miller mentions he's planning on getting married pretty soon. The barber happens to be a minister of the Church of Christ and offers to perform the ceremony. Frank Miller says he might take him up on it and gives the reverend a five-dollar bill for the shave. Then him and his boys robbed the bank."

Coalgate was on that line south, but then they veered way over west to Kingfisher, took six thousand from the First National but lost a man: Jim Ray Monks, slow coming out of the bank on his bum legs, was shot down in the street. Before Monks knew he was dying he told them, "Frank's sore you never put more'n five hundred on his head. He's out to show he's worth a whole lot more."

The bank after Kingfisher was American National in Baxter Springs, way up on the Kansas line. The gang appeared to specialize in robbing banks in dinky towns, rush in with gunfire to get people's attention, and ride out with a hostage or two on the running board as a shield. Hit three or four banks in a row and then disappear for a time. There were reports of gang members spotted during these periods of lying low, but Frank Miller was never one of them.

"I bet anything," Carl said, standing before the wall map in Bob Cardell's office, "he hides out in Checotah, at Faye Harris's place."

"Where we nabbed him," Bob Cardell said, nodding, remembering. "Faye was just a girl then, wasn't she?"

"I heard Frank was already seeing her," Carl said, "while she's married to Skeet, only Skeet didn't have the nerve to call him on it."

"You heard, huh?"

"Sir, twice I drove down to McAlester on my day off, see what I could find out about Frank Miller."

"The convicts talk to you?"

"One did, a Creek use to be in his gang. He said it wasn't a marshal shot Skeet Harris in the gun battle that time. It was Frank Miller himself to get Skeeter out of the way so he could have his wife."

"You learned this on your own?"

"Yes, sir. It was after that witness in Coalgate said he spoke of getting married. I thought it must be to Faye--don't you think? I mean if he's so sweet on her he killed her husband? That's what tells me he hides out there."

Bob Cardell said, "Well, we been talking to people, watching every place he's known to frequent. Look it up, I'm sure Faye Harris is on the list."

"I did," Carl said. "She's checked off as having been questioned and deputies are keeping an eye on her place. But I doubt they do more than drive past, see if Frank Miller's drawers are hanging on the line."

"You're a marshal four months," Bob Cardell said, "and you know everything."

Carl didn't speak, Bob Cardell staring at him.

Bob Cardell saying after a few moments, "I recall the time you shot that cattle thief off his horse at four hundred yards." Bob Cardell saying after another silence but still holding Carl with his stare, "You have some kind of scheme you want to try."

"I've poked around and learned a few things about Faye Harris," Carl said, "where she used to live and all. I believe I can get her to talk to me."

Bob Cardell said, "How'd you get so sure of yourself ?"

Marshals dropped Carl off a quarter mile from the house, turned the car around, and drove back to Checotah; they'd be at the Shady Grove Cafe. Carl was wearing work clothes and boots, his .38 Special holstered beneath a limp old suitcoat of Virgil's, a black one, his star in a pocket.

Walking the quarter mile his gaze held on this worn-out homestead, the whole dismal hundred and sixty looking deserted, the dusty Ford coupe in the backyard abandoned. Carl expected Faye Harris to be in no better shape than her property, living here like an outcast. The house did take on life as he mounted the porch, the voice of Uncle Dave Macon coming from a radio somewhere inside; and now Faye Harris was facing him through the screen, a girl in a silky nightgown that barely came to her knees, barefoot, but with rouge giving her face color and her blonde hair marcelled like a movie star's. . . .

You dumbbell, of course she hadn't let herself go, she was waiting for a man to come and marry her. Carl smiled, meaning it.

"Miz Harris, I'm Carl Webster." He kept looking at her face so she wouldn't think he was trying to see through her nightgown, which he could, easy. "I believe your mom's name is Atha Trudell? She worked at the Georgian Hotel in Henryetta doing rooms at one time and belonged to Eastern Star?"

It nudged her enough to say, "Yeah . . . ?"

"So'd my mom, Narcissa Webster?"

Faye shook her head.

"Your daddy was a coal miner up at Spelter, pit boss on the Little Gem. He lost his life that time she blew in '16. My dad was down in the hole laying track." Carl paused. "I was ten years old."

Faye said, "I just turned fifteen," her hand on the screen door to open it, but then hesitated. "Why you looking for me?"

"Lemme tell you what happened," Carl said. "I'm at the Shady Grove having a cup of coffee, the lady next to me at the counter says she works at a cafe serves way better coffee 'n here. Purity's, up at Henryetta."

Faye said, "What's her name?"

"She never told me."

"I use to work at Purity."

"I know, but wait," Carl said. "The way you came up in the conversation, the lady says her husband's a miner up at Spelter. I tell her my dad was killed there in '16. She says a girl at Purity lost her daddy in that same accident. She mentions knowing the girl's mom

from Eastern Star, I tell her mine belonged too. The waitress behind the counter's pretending not to listen, but now she turns to us and says, "The girl you're talking about lives right up the road there."

"I bet I know which one it was," Faye said. "She have kind of a Betty Boop hairstyle?"

"I believe so."

"What else she say?"

"You're a widow, lost your husband."

"She tell you marshals gunned him down?"

"Nothing about that."

"It's what everybody thinks. She mention any other names?"

What everybody thinks. Carl put that away and said, "No, she got busy serving customers."

"You live in Checotah?"

He told her Henryetta, he was visiting his old grandma about to pass. She asked him, "What's your name again?" He told her and she said, "Well, come on in, Carl, and have a glass of ice tea." Sounding now like she wouldn't mind company.

There wasn't much to the living room besides a rag rug on the floor and stiff black furniture, chairs and a sofa, their cane seats giving way from years of being sat on. The radio was playing in the kitchen. Faye went out there and pretty soon Carl could hear her chipping ice. He stepped over to a table laid out with

magazines, True Confession, Photoplay, Liberty, Dime Western, one called Spicy, . . .

Her voice reached him, asking, "You like Gid Tanner?"

Carl recognized the radio music. He said, "Yeah, I do," as he looked at pictures in Spicy of girls doing housework in their underwear, one girl up on a ladder in teddies with a feather duster.

"Gid Tanner and his Skillet Lickers," Faye's voice said. "You know who I kinda like? That Al Jolson, he sure sounds like a nigger on that mammy song. But you want to know who my very favorite is?"

Carl said, "Jimmie Rodgers?" looking at pictures of Joan Crawford and Elissa Landi now in Photoplay.

"I like Jimmie okay. . . . How many sugars?"

"Three'll do 'er. How about Uncle Dave Macon? He was on just a minute ago."

" 'Take Me Back to My Old Carolina Home.' I don't care for the way he half-sings and half-talks a song. If you're a singer you oughta sing. No, my favorite's Maybelle Carter and the Carter Family. The pure loneliness she gets in her voice just tears me up."

"Must be how you feel," Carl said, "living out here."

She said, "Don't give it another thought."

"Sit here by yourself reading magazines ..."

"Honey," Faye said, "you're not as cute as you think you are. Drink your ice tea and beat it."

"I'm sympathizing with you," Carl said. "The only reason I came, I wondered if you and I might even've known each other from funerals, and our moms being in the same club. . . . That's all." He smiled just a little, saying, "I wanted to see what you look like."

Faye said, "All right, you are cute, but don't get nosy."

She left him with his iced tea and went in the bedroom. Now what? Carl took Photoplay across the room to sit in a chair facing the table of magazines and the bedroom door, left open. He turned pages in the magazine. It wasn't a minute later she stuck her head out.

"You've been to Purity, haven't you?"

"Lot of times."

She stepped into plain sight now wearing a pair of sheer, peach-colored teddies, the crotch sagging beneath her white thighs. Faye said, "You hear about the time Pretty Boy Floyd came in?"

Carl could see London, he could see France. . . .
"While you were working there?"

"Since then, not too long ago. The word got around Pretty Boy Floyd was at Purity and it practically shut down the whole town. Nobody'd come out of their house." She stood with hands on her hips in kind of a slouch. "I did meet him one time. Was at a speak in Oklahoma City."

"You talk to him?"

"Yeah, we talked about . . . you know, different things." She looked like she might be trying to think of what they did talk about, but said then, "Who's the most famous person you ever met?"

He wasn't expecting the question. Still, he thought about it for no more than a few seconds before telling her, "I guess it would have to be Frank Miller."

Faye said, "Oh . . . ?" like the name didn't mean much to her. Carl could tell, though, she was being careful, on her guard.

"Was in a drugstore when I was a kid," Carl said, "and Frank Miller came in for a pack of Luckies. I'd stopped there for a peach icecream cone, my favorite. You know what Frank Miller did? Asked could he have a bite--this famous bank robber."

"You give him one?"

"I did, and you know what? He kept it, wouldn't give me back my cone."

"He ate it?"

"Licked it a few times and threw it away." Carl didn't mention the trace of ice cream on Frank Miller's mustache; he kept that for himself. "Yeah, he took my ice-cream cone, robbed the store, and shot a policeman. You believe it?"

She seemed to nod, thoughtful now, and Carl decided it was time to come out in the open.

"You said people think it was marshals gunned down your husband, Skeet. But you know better, don't

you?"

He had her full attention, staring at him now like she was hypnotized.

"And I'll bet it was Frank himself told you. Who else'd have the nerve? I'll bet he said you ever leave him he'll hunt you down and kill you. On account of he's so crazy about you. I can't think of another reason you'd stay here these years. You have anything to say to that?"

Faye began to show herself, saying, "You're not from a newspaper ..."

"Is that what you thought?"

"They come around. Once they're in the house they can't wait to leave. No, you're not at all like them."

Carl said, "Faye, I'm a Deputy United States Marshal. I'm here to put Frank Miller under arrest or in the ground, one."

Part III

He worried she might've acquired an affection for the man, but it wasn't so. Once Carl showed her his star Faye sat down and breathed with relief. Pretty soon her nerves did take hold and she became talkative. Frank had phoned this morning and was coming. Now what was she supposed to do? Carl asked what time she expected him. She said going on dark. A car would drive past and honk twice; if the front door was open when it drove past again Frank would jump out and the car would keep going. Carl

said he'd be sitting here reading about Joan Crawford. He said introduce him as a friend of the family happened to stop by, but try not to talk too much. He asked if Frank brought the magazines. She said they were supposed to be her treat. He asked out of curiosity if Frank could read. Faye said she wasn't sure, but believed he only looked at the pictures. What was it Virgil called him that time, years ago? A bozo.

He said to Faye, "What you want to do is pay close attention. Then later on you can tell what happened here as the star witness and get your name in the paper. I bet even your picture."

"I hadn't thought of that," Faye said. "You really think so?"

They heard the car beep twice as it passed the house. Ready?

Carl was, in the chair facing the magazine table where the only lamp in the room was lit. Faye stood smoking a cigarette, smoking three or four since drinking the orange-juice glass of gin to settle her down. Light from the kitchen, behind her, showed her figure in the kimono she was wearing. Faye looked fine to Carl.

But not to Frank Miller. Not the way he came in with magazines under his arm and barely paused before saying to her, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Faye said. "Frank, I want you to meet Carl, from home." Frank staring at him now as Faye said he was a busboy at Purity the same time she was working there. "And our moms are both Eastern Star."

"You're Frank," Carl said, sounding like a salesman. "Glad to know you, Frank." Carl looking at a face from six years ago, the same dead-eyed stare beneath the hat brim. He watched Frank Miller carry his magazines to the table, drop them on top of the ones there and glance over at Faye; watched him plant both hands on the table now, hunched over, taking time to what, rest? Unh-unh, decide how to get rid of this busboy so he could take Faye to bed, Carl imagining Frank doing it to her with his hat still on ... and remembered his dad saying, "You know why I caught the Mauser round that time, the Spanish sniper picking me off? I was thinking instead of paying attention, doing my job."

Carl asked himself what he was waiting for. He said, "Frank, bring out your pistol and lay it there on the table."

Faye Harris knew how to tell it. She had recited her story enough times to marshals and various law enforcement people. This afternoon she was describing the scene to newspaper reporters--and the one from the Oklahoman, the Oklahoma City paper, kept interrupting, asking questions that were a lot different than ones the marshals asked.

She referred to Deputy Marshal Webster as "Carl" and the one from the Oklahoman said, "Oh, you two are on intimate terms now? You don't mind he's just a kid? Has he visited you here at the hotel?" Faye was staying a few days at the Georgian in Henryetta. The other reporters in the room would tell the Oklahoman to keep quiet for Christ sake, anxious for Faye to get to the gunplay.

"As I told you," Faye said, "I was in the doorway to the kitchen.

Frank's over here to my left, and Carl's opposite him but sitting down, his legs stretched out in his cowboy boots. I couldn't believe how calm he was."

"What'd you have on, Faye?"

The Oklahoman interrupting again, some of the other reporters groaning.

"I had on a pink and red kimono Frank got me at Kerr's in Oklahoma City. I had to wear it whenever he came."

"You have anything on under it?"

Faye said, "None of your beeswax."

The Oklahoman said his readers had a right to know such details of how a gun moll dressed. This time the other reporters were quiet, like they wouldn't mind hearing such details themselves, until Faye said, "If this big mouth opens his trap one more time I'm through and y'all can leave." She said, "Now where was I?"

"Frank was leaning on the table."

"That was it. He looked over at me like he was gonna say something, and right then Carl said, 'Frank?' He said, 'Draw your pistol and lay it there on the table.'"

The reporters wrote it down in their notebooks and then waited as Faye took a sip of iced tea.

"I told you Frank had his back to Carl? Now I see him turn his face to his shoulder and say to him, 'Do I know you from someplace?' Maybe thinking of McAlester, Carl an ex-convict looking to earn the reward money. Frank asks him, 'Have we met or not?' And Carl says, 'If I told you, I doubt you'd remember.' Then--this is where Carl says, 'Frank, I'm a Deputy United States Marshal. I'll tell you one more time to lay your pistol on the table.'"

A reporter said, "Faye, I know they did meet. I'm from the Okmulgee Daily Times and I wrote the story about it. Was six years ago to the month."

"What you're doing," Faye said, "is holding up my getting to the good part." Messing up her train of thought, too.

"But the circumstances of how they met," the reporter said, "could have something to do with this story."

"Would you please," Faye said, "wait till I'm done?"

It gave her time to tell the next part: how Frank had no choice but to draw his gun, this big pearl-handled automatic, from inside his coat and lay it on the edge of the table, right next to him. "Now as he turns around," Faye said, starting to grin, "this surprised look came over his face. He sees Carl sitting there, not with a gun in his hand but Photoplay magazine. Frank can't believe his eyes. He says, 'Jesus Christ, you don't have a gun?' Carl pats the side of his chest where his gun's hol-stered under his coat and says, 'Right here.' Then he says, 'Frank, I want to be clear about this so you understand. If I pull my

weapon I'll shoot to kill." Faye said to the reporters, "In other words, the only time Carl Webster draws his gun it's to shoot somebody dead."

It had the reporters scribbling in their notebooks and making remarks to each other, the one from the Daily Times saying now, "Listen, will you? Six years ago Frank Miller held up Deering's drugstore in Okmulgee and Carl Webster was there. Only he was known as Carlos then, he was still a kid. He stood by and watched Frank Miller shoot and kill an Indian from the tribal police happened to come in the store, a man Carl Webster must've known." The reporter looked at Faye and said, "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I think the drugstore shooting could've been on Carl Webster's mind."

Faye said, "I can tell you something else about that."

But now voices were chiming in, commenting and asking questions about the Okmulgee reporter's views:

"Carl carried it with him all these years?"

"Did he remind Frank Miller of it?"

"You're saying the tribal cop was a friend of his?"

"Both from Okmulgee, Carl thinking of becoming a lawman?"

"Carl ever say he was out to get Frank Miller?"

"This story's bigger'n it looks."

Faye said, "You want to hear something else happened?"

"How Carl was eating an ice-cream cone that time and what Frank did?"

They sat on the porch sipping tequila at the end of the day, insects out there singing in the dark. A lantern hung above Virgil's head so he could see to read the newspapers on his lap.

"Most of it seems to be what this little girl told."

"They made up some of it."

"Jesus, I hope so. You haven't been going out with her, have you?"

"I drove down, took her to Purity a couple times."

"She's a pretty little thing. Has a saucy look about her in the pictures, wearing that kimona."

"She smelled nice, too," Carl said.

Virgil turned his head to him. "I wouldn't tell Bob Cardell that. One of his marshals sniffing around a gun moll." He waited, but Carl let that one go. Virgil looked at the newspaper he was holding. "I don't recall you were ever a buddy of Junior Harjo's."

"I'd see him and say hi is all."

"The Daily Times has you two practically blood brothers. What you did was avenge his death. They wonder if it might even be the reason you joined the marshals."

"Yeah, I read that," Carl said.

Virgil put the Daily Times down and slipped the

Oklahoman out from under it. "But now the Oklahoma City paper says you shot Frank Miller 'cause he took your ice-cream cone that time in the drugstore. They trying to be funny?"

"I guess," Carl said.

"They could make up a name for you, as smart-aleck newspapers do, start calling you Carl Webster, the Ice Cream Kid?"

"What if they do?"

"I'm getting the idea you like this attention."

Virgil saying it with some concern and Carl giving him a shrug. Virgil picked up another paper from the pile. "Here they quote the little girl saying Frank Miller went for his gun and you shot him through the heart."

"I thought they have her saying, 'straight through the heart,'" Carl said. He turned to see his old dad staring at him with a solemn expression. "I'm kidding with you. What Frank did, he tried to bluff me. He looked toward Faye and called her name thinking I'd look over. But I kept my eyes on him, knowing he'd pick up his Colt. He came around with it and I shot him."

"As you told him you would," Virgil said. "Every one of the newspapers played it up, your saying, 'If I draw my weapon I shoot to kill.' You tell 'em that?"

"The only one I told was Frank Miller," Carl said. "It had to've been Faye told the papers."

"Well, that little girl sure tooted your horn for you."

"She only told what happened."

"All she had to. It's the telling that did it, made you a famous lawman overnight. You think you can carry a load like that?"

"I was born to," Carl said, starting to show himself.

It didn't surprise his old dad. Virgil picked up his glass of tequila and raised it to his boy, saying, "God help us showoffs."